

TV OR NOT TV

James Rhem, Executive Editor

Powerful prejudices die hard even in academe. But it's the nature of education to kill prejudice, even among its own. That's what's happening with television. Long reviled as the emblem of a culture in decline, television seems ready to lead the vigor of liberal learning back into the mainstream of American life.

Ironically, we may be ready to use the power of television because TV is no longer the issue. The issue — one that teaching television directly enjoins — is whether higher education is about passing on received opinions or cultivating a critical engagement with experience. If it's about the latter, new attitudes toward and uses of television offer teachers perhaps the most powerful cultural and cognitive shoehorn ever imagined.

Liberating Curricula

Robert Thompson, who teaches at Syracuse University, is perhaps TV's most vocal champion: "I'm very convinced, sincerely convinced — and not just because this is what I do for a living — that the last real hope for liberal arts education as we've traditionally defined it in this country is to acknowledge the usefulness of teaching popular culture, television, whatever you want to include in that, within the university at a very early level. I do think it's the only entryway into the kinds of things we're supposed to teach in liberal education. We need to remember the etymological base of liberal education is to be 'liberating,' freeing, allowing us to think for ourselves, and I don't think the way we've been going about it is working, and I think we've had a lot of time to see that it's not working using the traditional ways we've tried."

Basically, Thompson believes higher education ought to be about the development of higher order, critical thinking as a mental lifestyle. Freshman studies curricula go wrong, he believes, when they try to cultivate these methods

of engagement with the world using materials, histories, and contexts completely remote from the students' experience. "These critical thinking methods are unfamiliar to most students," he says, "and if you tie on top of teaching unfamiliar methods a set of equally unfamiliar intimidating texts — novels, romantic poetry, Elizabethan drama, 19th-century symphonic music — you've completely alienated 90% of your class right there. You're teaching something that's unfamiliar with something that's unfamiliar."

For Thompson, the ubiquity of TV in students' lives is a professor's dream come true. "When students walk into the classroom," he says, "they've done all the reading. They know the specifics of what I'm talking about, and we can go into a level of discussion that wouldn't be possible until graduate school in most other subjects."

Susan Neuman, a psychologist who teaches at Temple University, agrees completely: "What you're doing is teaching [students] a mode of thinking that they will apply to any medium. It's not the medium that really matters," she says. "[What matters is] that they are engaged in higher level thinking. Students feel efficacious in watching television," says Neuman. Being engaged on a critical level — and enjoying the feeling of being engaged on this level — gives students an immediate experience of their higher cognitive capacities. Not only do they like the feeling, she says, the experience makes the movement over to critical engagement with other kinds of material much easier. "Even language-minority students feel they are totally capable of watching television and understanding it," says Neuman, "so it is an easy medium for easing people into a cognitive activity that really is quite complex."

Viewing Is Reading

Neuman laughs that after 15 years of scientific study of the medium, she sometimes becomes so exasperated at hearing it denounced that she swears to her husband she's going to give up her

research. But she doesn't. She sticks with it because she believes in the potential of television to develop literacy across media and in all age groups. "We always thought that print was the higher level medium," she says, "but that's not true." Neuman's research has found that television watching is a "schema-driven" process very similar to the cognitive model involved in reading. "As people are watching television, they are constructing knowledge," she says. "They may at times look like zombies before the television set, but they aren't. They're integrating their prior knowledge. They are fitting it or slot-fitting it into an organizational frame they have in their mind."

"TV has the same capacity for inference generation as print," Neuman maintains. "It's the content that matters, not the medium."

Arguments championing the cognitive potential of television almost always become coopted by denunciations of its content. Neuman admits that unarguable cultural milestones like Alex Haley's *Roots* or Ken Burns's *The Civil War* haven't changed the (un)popular image of television among academics. One reason for that lies in the fact that the language level of the typical, mass television, network program remains at about the fourth-grade level, she says. But that, too, is changing. With the advent of videotape and specialized, "narrow-casting" cable channels, the monolithic uses of the medium are breaking down and its potential as a medium of teaching and learning is being recognized. Indeed, Neuman's research shows that even with a fourth-grade language level dominant, the medium already has a powerful positive effect that most academics (and most print media) refuse to acknowledge.

"We did an analysis of over two million children — a gigantic study on a national level involving eight states around the country," she says. "We looked at achievement scores — primary, intermediate and high school level, plus a sub-sample of

adults — and we found that those who watched between two and four hours of television a day had the highest achievement scores. After four hours, there's a falloff, but between two and four, those people *always* score the highest. No one ever talks about that although it's been widely reported," she says. People want a devil to blame, she says, and because TV is at once pervasive and in a sense anonymous, it's an easy target.

Of Cultures and Canons

If many academics would be willing to accept TV as a kind of cognitive primer on the way to Dickens, Descartes and Darwin, they find TV's advocates unwilling to accept step-child status. David Bianculli, television critic for National Public Radio whose book *Teleliteracy: Taking Television Seriously* came out last year, says: "What I don't like is the implied superiority of the stuff we're getting to: We'll use TV only as a hook; once we [get students to] learn these skills by using it, then we'll get into F. Scott Fitzgerald, and that will be really something. But F. Scott Fitzgerald may have less to say to this time than the TV shows you're using to get to him."

Talk like that appears to challenge the value of the canon of great works and ideas which many regard as the foundation stones of liberal education. Even among his peers, Robert Thompson's extended consideration of *The Love Boat* often leaves more skeptics than converts. Thompson admits, "It's a mischievous choice." He makes it to make a point about received opinion and independent thinking.

Thompson asks his classes which is better, Shakespeare or *The Love Boat*. They all answer, "Shakespeare." "Then I ask them how much Shakespeare they've read," says Thompson. They've read very little. "Then how do you know it's better?" he asks. "Well, *The Love Boat*'s stories are two-dimensional," students respond. "Well, what about *Romeo and Juliet*?" Thompson counters. "*The Love Boat* is unrealistic," students say. "You mean in every Shakespeare comedy when

someone puts on someone else's tunic and is instantly mistaken for them, that's realistic?" Thompson goads them. And on and on the discussion goes.

"Suddenly," says Thompson, "they realize their idea that Shakespeare is superior comes not from their own appreciation and love of Shakespeare or from the usual criteria brought up in immediate objection, but it comes exclusively from some system of judgment that someone else has given them. They got it in the same way that racism, sexism and a lot of other things are passed on — unthinkingly."

Like John Fiske, who teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Thompson is willing to risk the sanctity of cultural canons in order to liberate students' desire and ability to think for themselves. Says Fiske, "Maybe in TV we're lucky because there isn't that old canonical way of thinking. I want students to realize that when we make critical value judgments, the values don't come out of nowhere," says Fiske. "I want to disabuse them of the idea that critical value judgments are in some way universal, based on a universal aesthetic and humanistic, platonic notion of the best that has been said and thought and all that sort of thing. Value judgments are socially located as everything else is." Fiske's line of reasoning (and Thompson's) leads to a kind of cultural relativism that makes a lot of people uncomfortable. Ultimately, it trusts that the process of active critical evaluation will always settle on a canon appropriate to the culture's needs and values, and that, as in the process of combustion, nothing will really be lost.

Feeding the (Critical) Thinking Monster

Far from unleashing barbarians, Thompson, Fiske, Neuman and others teaching television and via television see the result as creating an intelligent democracy. "My charge to students," says Thompson, "has two parts to it based on the fact that the critical spirit has a voracious appetite. First, I give them the machine of critical thinking, the critical posture, and second, I

have to tell them how to keep it running." Once students experience independent and critical thinking within themselves, they find their appetite for it awakened; they want to do it.

Thompson recalls teaching in a less-than-prestigious state school in up-state New York early in his career and having a student come up at the end of his course and ask for a list of classic reading material so he could "get up to speed" during the summer. "If that happened to an English teacher, they'd probably die and go to heaven," says Thompson. "Generally English departments are major enemies of what we do in TV, but at the end of one of my classes, I've produced a student who's become hungry not only to apply critical thinking to television, but to begin to go a little further. I've produced a student who's ready in fact to enroll in an English department, and I don't think that happens at the end of most freshman intros to lit."

To feed the hunger for critical engagement that's been awakened in them, says Thompson, students quickly find they need to learn history, to read, to seek contrary opinions and more information. "Suddenly, what you've created is not someone who can be the first person on the block to talk intelligently about TV, but someone who will forever have an appetite and an intellectual curiosity to learn, and to me that is what a liberal arts education is supposed to create."

And for the professor there's one more benefit: "The great thing about it is you don't have to wait a couple of years," says Thompson. There are times in class when you can almost literally see the scales falling from their eyes. It's a heady experience, I'll tell you." ■■■

For Further Reading:

Bianculli, David. *Teleliteracy: Taking Television Seriously*. New York: Continuum, 1992.

Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 1991.

Marc, David and Robert J. Thompson. *Prime Time, Prime Movers: From I Love Lucy to L.A. Law — America's Greatest TV Shows and the People Who Created Them*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1992.

Neuman, Susan B. *Literacy in the Television Age: The Myth of the TV*